

"BAPTISM, EUCHARIST AND MINISTRY" A PASTOR'S VIEW

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How refreshing to read a work from the minds of "over one hundred theologians" that is orderly, logical and clear. That scholars could work together for any length of time and be able to reduce their efforts to a mere thirty-three pages is noteworthy. Here is a parse text indeed, intended to be scrutinized not merely by professionals but by ordinary Christians, if this phrase is not an oxymoron. Only a handful of words—*berakah*, *anamnesis*, *epiklesis*, *exousia*, heavy with connotations—were properly left untranslated. Any text that would announce itself with an encomium such as "here marks a major advance in the ecumenical journey. The result of a fifty-year process of study and consultation," as appears on the cover, invites careful criticism, for this is quite an accolade, even for a time when ubiquitous advertisements immure one to self-congratulatory remarks. Yet the contents go a long way to justify the promise.

Six pages are taken for baptism, eight for eucharist and the remainder, half of the paper, for ministry, which also commands most of the commentary. The paper is well ordered. A topic is defined, the meaning discussed, then follow the practical matters of the subject: those taking part, the form of worship or ministry and the manner in which it is celebrated. One might anticipate caution and precision in word selection, and indeed, such appears to be the case throughout. The body of the paper contains all that had met with general acceptance by the scholars, supplemented by marginalia in italics pointing to areas that require further study. "Acceptance" is a premise more clearly defined in the preface. Rather than acceptance, which connotes endorsement, the concept of "convergence" is introduced, a winsome idea fit for a process of theology, since it signifies movement toward a confluence of formerly separated streams of thinking. Care is taken to distinguish measured agreement

from consensus, implying the consent required to affirm an already experienced communion in beliefs, practices, witness and a life of unity in Christ. We press down on this metaphor at some peril, however, since the image of the Church as well as the symbol for ecumenism is a ship in a stream, not the waters outside. It implies a oneness already realized, harmony of rule, a single helmsman and a common purpose.

This is not to fault the paper, but to praise it for its forthrightness in stating differences frankly—as for instance in the eucharist section (III.32), which presents the various understandings of the presence of Christ in the consecrated elements, then follows with prudent suggestions for mutual respect and true purpose of the sacrament. Treatment is honest and evenhanded throughout. It is tacitly presumed that consensus is found regarding the scriptures—certainly a prerequisite to any theological convergence and for which all Christians should praise God. Evidence from the Bible is stated to illuminate a point, yet church tradition is presented and recognized, at least for some, to carry authority. A case in point regards the matter of admitting women to ordination: “An increasing number of churches have decided that there is no biblical or theological reason against ordaining women . . . Yet many churches hold that the tradition of the Church in this regard must not be changed” (“Ministry,” II.18). This is balanced, sensitive and irenic; yet, dare we Orthodox read too much in the text, claiming for the capital “C” an acknowledgment that there is indeed The Church above the discussion among churches, and would that not provoke a challenge from others? The paper lends itself to such varieties of interpretations that one would like to know more about the discussions that went into its composition, as well as the reactions from Christians everywhere. Does it say too much or too little?

Baptism

For at least this Orthodox Christian, more might have been included in the baptism as well as the ministry section. But baptism first. It seems that while sin and evil are mentioned as enemies, they are never explained. True, as the preface states, all matters cannot be dealt with; and given the positive, uplifting nature of the paper, it may have been designed, perhaps, to meet the needs of a contemporary culture not as concerned with Satan, evil and death as those in the past. Nevertheless the omission is glaring, and passing references will not suffice to justify the failure to mention some-

where passages such as Mark 1:27, 3:15 and especially 3:22ff. Does the subject embarrass modern theologians? Along with this is a failure to even refer to exorcism among the elements in the order of baptism, except for the terse "renunciation of evil" ("Baptism," V. 20).

Those, such as ourselves, who practice infant baptism are taken to task, and properly so, for "indiscriminate baptism," if indeed we might be found guilty (IV.16), and are urged to "take more seriously their responsibility for the nurture of baptized children to mature commitment to Christ." From whatever the source the criticism comes, the suggestion is well founded.

The reconciling aspect of the paper might be demonstrated in the relatively detailed commentary in the baptism section (IV.12), where it is suggested that the differences between "infant baptism" and "believers' baptism become less sharp when it is recognized that both forms of baptism embody God's own initiative in Christ and express a response of faith made within the believing community." Such epiphanies of insight, casting light on the paths to convergence, ought to be lifted up and celebrated, for indeed misinformation leading to false premises regarding the theology of other Christians has frozen our streams and kept them from confluence.

In general terms, with the exceptions noted earlier, we can only sing a hearty "amen" to the principles lifted up in the baptism section—specifically, oneness in Christ; participation in Christ's life, death and resurrection; release from slavery; gift of the Holy Spirit (although more might have been mentioned on this vital subject); sign of the initiation into the kingdom of God; and the emphasis on the need for a continual, lifelong growth into Christ (III.9). Important as well is the disavowal of any form of rebaptism (IV.13), and the mutual recognition of baptism into Christ, when the proper conditions are fulfilled (IV.15).

Eucharist

The section on the eucharist is the crown of the paper. So much of the work represents solid Orthodox doctrine and practice, reflecting, if not the handiwork of Orthodox theologians, at least input from those with such classical liturgical perspectives.

But what in the name of reality does this mean for those with a significantly reduced liturgical structure, as compared to that outlined in III.27 of the section on eucharist? Not only the conventional communions proceeding from the Reformation, but the tradi-

tional Catholic churches of the West, now in the process of contemporizing their liturgies, might wonder what they are to make of these eucharistic ingredients. It is not our place to present a western Christian viewpoint, yet if this presentation of so sterling an Orthodox witness to eucharistic worship is to serve as a catalyst for unity we must ascertain how relevant it will be to those for whom this section of the paper must be a revelation.

For the Orthodox, however, we can only endorse the manifest wealth of traditional elements of the divine mystery contained therein. Whereas so much of ecumenical theology is perhaps justifiably christocentric, here we have a marvelous trinitarian balance of persons present in the sacrament: "The world is present in the thanksgiving to the Father" (II.23); "the eucharist brings into the present age a new reality which transforms Christians into the image of Christ" (II.26); "The Holy Spirit through the eucharist gives a foretaste of the Kingdom of God" (II.18); Christ is present in the anamnesis and we are propelled toward the kingdom with a foretaste of the parousia—but lest it be charged that this be some Platonic evasion of the here and now, the text is replete with references to the connection between the eucharistic action and the contemporary world. If we were to discover some caveat to this paean to liturgical theology it might be that the proclaimed word of God may not have been fully related to the eucharistic celebration, except for inclusion among the elements of the service the "proclamation of the Word of God, in various forms" (III.27), and as scattered elsewhere.

Ministry

From the clear, consistent and confident section describing the eucharist, one enters upon reading "Ministry" a product indicative of strained labor in attempting to do justice to the history of the subject while searching for ways to enable the process of converging of traditions. A text at once turgid and tentative, it would appear from its length and internal evidence that this theme has presented the scholars with more challenges than other parts of the paper. The size is twice that of either of the earlier sections; also, there appears to be greater need for clarifications, since definitions are in greater abundance than in the other sections.

The initial statement, which sets the tone for the discourse, appears at first to be straightforward, acceptable to all Christians: "In a broken world God calls the whole of humanity to become

God's people" (I.1). The ecumenically alert recognize that the awkward repetition of "God" is designed to avoid sexist language; otherwise, "his" would replace the second proper noun. But the real problem is not with the noun, but the adjective. Is the world broken or fallen? The question is not insignificant, but touches on the meaning of salvation. Is it grace that we need, or adhesive? If the world can be bonded together, will that result in a paradisaical state or, more teleologically, as an earnest of the kingdom of God? Is the term "broken" utilized merely to avoid suggesting an anachronistic, three-tiered cosmology, or is it instead presenting an intentional allusion to a "no-fault" universe, evading the cause for the world's condition, the way a child tells a parent a toy simply broke "by itself?"

A certain opacity occurs in various places, perhaps due to assumptions of terms that in the context can be misleading—consider, for instance, "The members of Christ's body are to struggle with the oppressed towards that freedom and dignity promised . . ." (I.4). Oppressed by whom? Are we to presume it refers to the "spiritual forces of evil" (Eph 6:12), or to systems of human organization, alluded to further on, e.g., "This mission needs to be carried out in varying political, social and cultural contexts"? Interesting, as well, is the linking of freedom with dignity, since freedom is commonly understood in the Bible and history in a wealth of settings, but dignity requires elucidation. Is it a spiritual or a sociological program that is called for?

The tenor of the section's arduous quest can be displayed by the query it puts to itself: "What can then be said about the functions and even the titles of bishops, presbyters and deacons?" (III.28). What, indeed. Given the context, these functions appear to be negotiable; certainly not as the Orthodox would describe them in the context of liturgy and leadership in communicating the gospel to the world. While the "ordained ministry" has something to do with sacraments and worship (II.13,14), such care is taken to qualify the parameters of that ministry that one is led to wonder if the underlying premise, i.e., usurpation of authority (II.16), ought not to require a word to express the positive aspects of the ordained ministry, or at least to point to a healthy tension existing between the people of God and their clergy.

In an irenic call for mutual understanding between the churches upholding the value of apostolic tradition and succession with those who find it of lesser significance, the paper refers to a "reality and functioning of the episcopal ministry . . . preserved in many of these churches" not in the episcopal tradition (IV.37). Unity would be

enhanced, presumably, by "recognizing the apostolic content of the ordained ministry" in such communions. Here is a daring proposal, but it will be efficacious only when those communions are prepared to cherish the Church of tradition in its pilgrimage through history, led by the Holy Spirit.

This section is tentative and properly so. It has assumed a formidable task, and the product sets forth in its assertions as well as in its style the challenge before Christian unity.

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